

Aeneas and Sinon

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In Book II of the *Aeneid*, Vergil offers the reader the chance to hear an eyewitness account of the fall of Troy at the same time as the Carthaginians hear it. We read for the same reason that they listen, that is to hear the details of the event as only an eyewitness or a poet could relate. These details are what strike the listener or reader and allow him to appreciate the story as a whole that much more. One easily forgotten but very significant element of the story is simply the fact that it is meant to be Aeneas rather than Vergil talking here. The reader is reading a story about people listening to a story – in which a storyteller, Sinon, figures prominently. It is reminiscent of the play within the play within the play in *Hamlet*.

Loss and havoc

Although comparing the two storytellers seems at first like comparing day and night, the tales they tell are similar in both content and effect. The fact that Aeneas is telling the truth while Sinon is telling a malevolent lie makes surprisingly little difference. Both men tell sad stories about how they lost their homes, although Aeneas' story is certainly broader in scope. To the Trojans, Sinon's story must seem every bit as reliable and convincing as Aeneas' story does to the Carthaginians. Both audiences must feel a great deal of sympathy, even tragic pity towards their speakers, and both audiences come to trust their speakers completely. At the end of Sinon's speech, Priam orders that the Greek 'exile's' chains be removed and invites him to live as a Trojan (2. 149). Even before Aeneas tells his story, Dido goes so far as to invite the Trojans to share in the building and government of the city (1 . 572).

In both cases the strangers wreak havoc on the cities that welcome them in spite of the fact that their motives are worlds apart. Vergil's use of language suggests that this irony is not an accident. In his description of the Greeks' invasion of Priam's palace, Vergil, through Aeneas, describes the high ceiling echoing with the cries of women, using the words *ululo* and *plangor* (2.487-488). He describes women running about the house aimlessly, kissing the columns goodbye (2. 490). In the description of Dido's suicide, he uses remarkably similar language. Again, he has grief-stricken women running about. He describes the city echoing with their cries, repeating the words *ululo* and *plangor* (4. 669-671), and even states that it sounds as though the city were being invaded.

It is clear that Dido and Priam meet similar fates because they trust too much in strangers and make themselves too vulnerable. This is not to say that they don't have sufficient

reasons to trust. Trusting is based on the conviction that the person trusted will not take advantage of one's vulnerability. This conviction is usually based on experience, but since it is largely an emotional reaction, it does not require certainty or logical proof. Priam and Dido, as rulers of cities, are not free to trust anyone because they risk the lives of all their subjects by doing so. They have more than the interests of 'one' at stake and cannot afford to be vulnerable.

Dido's dilemma

It seems that Dido realizes that she cannot remarry and remain an autonomous ruler. Much like Elizabeth I, she must deal with a conflict between her duty as a queen and her needs as a human being. Dido copes with this situation by vowing to remain a widow and by convincing herself that her husband's death has robbed her of the right to love (4. 27-28).

Aeneas' first words to Dido are, *coram quem quaeritis adsum Troius Aeneas*, 'here I am in person, the one you seek, Trojan Aeneas'. (1. 595-688). He is the answer to her prayers, the one she has wished for. Finally, here is a chance for her to put down the burden of loneliness without giving up her sovereignty. She has every reason to trust Aeneas. He is famous for his reliability; Vergil calls him 'pius' throughout the *Aeneid*. Dido has obviously heard of him and knows his reputation as a hero (1. 617). Though the Trojan war has ended fairly recently, there is evidence that it is already becoming a legend. There is even a mural on the temple of Juno in Carthage dedicated to the war. Dido reacts to this visit from a heaven-born hero of the Trojan war the way a modern person would react to a visit from Superman.

Priam's trust

Priam also has enough reasons to feel emotionally secure about trusting Sinon. While it is easy to criticize the Trojans and their king for trusting Sinon too easily when we are told outright that he is a liar (2. 65-66), Priam and his subjects do not have this advantage. They believe Sinon as readily as the Carthaginians believe Aeneas. Sinon's speaking ability alone could easily be enough to sway a crowd of war-weary Trojans. Furthermore, he swears by the eternal fires and by the inviolate gods that he has renounced all loyalty to the Greeks (2. 154-159). To make such a vow and lie is to risk punishment from the gods. The oath itself would be enough to convince Priam that he does not have to pick through Sinon's story for inconsistencies.

This is not the first time that Priam has trusted an enemy. In the *Iliad*, he secretly went to Achilles as a suppliant and begged him to return Hector's body. Achilles respected the old king's rights as a suppliant, gave the body back and treated his guest with kindness, even weeping with him for a time. Priam was able to trust Achilles of all people because Achilles

lived by a code that made killing a helpless old man a dishonourable thing. It seems significant that Vergil has Priam bring this incident up before his death (2. 435-443). Priam's rebuke of Pyrrhus could easily apply to Sinon as well and even to the Greeks as a whole. They have won because of a sacrilegious lie, and the gods have chosen to look the other way. How can the code that Achilles lived by mean anything after such a victory? There seems to be a feeling that You Can't Trust Anyone Nowadays in the *Aeneid* and Vergil may very well be saying that the old idea of honour died at Troy with the heroes who upheld it.

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